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ABSTRACT

Special Services for the Disadvantaged Students (SSDS) is a federally funded three-year college retention program initiated at a Texas community college. The program's objectives include improving reading and math levels, improving achievement of handicapped students, and increasing skills in English as a second language. To accomplish these objectives, the college provides six professional developmental education instructors. The need for the program was indicated by a 1982 survey, which indicated nine common learning problems: lack of academic skills, poor attitude, low aspirations, cognitive styles, handicapped students, low income, limited English speaking ability, lack of college survival skills, and a lack of counseling. Special services of the program include (1) "success sessions" (consisting of an interview and career and academic needs assessment, a review of testing results, and a prescriptive learning plan); (2) study centers; (3) regular contact between the program's developmental instructors and the participating students' regular teachers; (4) field trips to work sites in the students' major areas of study; and (5) providing a mentor for each student in the program, who gives students individualized academic and emotional support. During its first semester, the program met its assigned objectives with few exceptions. (HTH)

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SUCCESS SESSIONS

John E. Rouche, George Baker and Suanne D. Rouche summarize their national study believing "that institutional responses to low-achieving students in terms of the development and maturity of retention programs is extremely important." And "finally (they) believe that the best harbingers of the future are institutional plans regarding low achievement students" (Rouche, Baker, Rouche, 1984, p.61).

The concept of the American college being obligated to supplement the American school was echoed back in 1869 when C.W. Eliot, in his inauguration address as president of Harvard College stated "Whatever elementary instruction the schools fail to give, the college must supply (Eliot, 1869].

"Underprepared students have been and continue to be an integral part of American higher education. Further, efforts to bridge the academic preparation gap are part of the traditional, if not formal, mission of higher education," (Brier, 1984].

Special Services for Disadvantaged Students (SSDS) is a federally-funded three year college retention program initiated at the El Paso Community College in the Fall of 1984. The project listed six major objectives:

1. A minimum of eighty percent of the projected 800 students annually served will be retained at the college through graduation or transfer to a four year institution.

2. A minimum of eighty percent of project students not already reading at the 12th grade level or above will be reading at the 12th grade level upon exit from the program.

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3. A minimum of eighty percent of project students not already proficient in basic math skills will demonstrate a minimum of 12th grade basic math proficiency upon exit from the program.

4. A minimum of eighty percent of project students will maintain a 2.5 grade point average each semester of participation.

5. A minimum of eighty percent of project handicapped students will successfully complete the courses in which they are enrolled each semester with a minimum of a 2.5 grade point average.

6. A minimum of eighty percent of project students for assistance in English as a Second Language (ESL) will successfully complete the courses in which they are enrolled each semester and advance to the next higher level the following semester. (There are six levels of ESL plus a pre-level course for unusually low competency students).

To accomplish each of the objectives, the college provides a core of six professional developmental education instructors and one secretary. The professionals included, a project coordinator, three accredited community college developmental education instructors (DEI), one DEI with a specialization in teaching the handicapped, one DEI-ESL specialist and a project counselor. All other resources of the Developmental Education Department and the rest of the college community were made available on a "good luck if you can get it" option.

Before moving on to the actual operation, let's take a brief look at the setting. The El Paso Community College in El Paso, Texas has three campuses in a city serving approximately 20,000 students from an area with a population approaching 500,000. It is the only 2-year college in the area which also has a four year institution, the University of Texas at El Paso. El Paso Community Collge is totally commuter oriented and its 62% Hispanic majority is comparable with the demographic representation of the community it serves. The college fosters

an open-door policy admitting anyone over 18 years of age or under (if they have a high school diploma, GED or their high school class has graduated). College catalogues are mailed to each resident in the county prior to regular registration and the college encourages mail registration to such an extent that more than half of the registered students do so by mail.

With the University drawing most of the serious-minded acamadacians, the El Paso Community College provides an educational channel not only for those who are not ready for the 4 year baccalaureate program but for many older students returning to college, seeking to change their careers or to better themselves through some form of higher educational training. The College also offers traditional and non traditional two year associate degree programs in a variety of fields. With more than 6000 students currently learning English, EPCC has an impressive English as a Second Language (ESL) program for the largely Hispanic population.

In a survey conducted by the administration during 1982, that eventually became the purpose of the Special Services for Disadvantaged Students Program, nine most common learning problems were identified:

1. Lack of Academic Skills -- A vast majority of entering freshmen came with inadequate prerequisites for successful college study (thinking skills, application, etc.)

2. Poor Attitude -- Over one-fourth of these students failed to see learning as a life-long experience (tunnel vision, unable to predict long-range results),

3. Low Aspirations -- Sixty three percent of registering students were afflicted. This included a negative self-image, lack of self-confidence and poor motivation.

4. Congnitive Styles -- Most students were unaware of and unable to use their own learning styles to their best advantage.

5. Limited English Speaking Ability -- One out of three of all students enrolled had difficulty in reading assignments and understanding instructors in class.

6. Lack of College Survival Skills -- Seventy percent did not understand how to take notes, outline, listen, take tests, use the library, dictionary or how to follow directions, read maps, charts, graphs, skim scan and had no memory training or instruction in effective concentration.

7. Lack of Counseling -- Many had little information about career counseling, employment skills, personal and social adjustments and interpersonal communications. Many never spoke with a counselor at all before starting classes.

8. Handicapped Students -- An average of 60 new severely handicapped students were admitted each semester. Their matriculation is characterized by;

a. a lack of educational objectives
b. high course repeat rate
c. high attrition rate
d. lack of academic skills
e. lack of social maturity

9. Low Income -- Half of all new students came from low-income families and were eligible for financial aid; Severe problems involved transportation, and other school costs. Financial constraints often caused students to miss class due to such reasons as employment, lack of child care and lack of family support.

Federal guidelines for admission to the program established specific eligibility criteria:

1. All handicapped students
2. Low income students who were first generation college students (neither parent having a bachelor degree)
3. Low income students eligible for financial aid.
4. First generation college students

Priorities for program selection were based upon:

1. Application date to participate
2. Academic need
3. Number of semesters completed at the college. Those with fewest hours were granted priority.
4. Commitment demonstrated by the individual to participate weekly in the campus study centers.

With the staffing completed, a projected 400 student per semester quota and the project participants identified, a massive recruitment effort was launched in August 1984. Newspaper, TV and radio announcements on the new program were augmented by letters and flyers sent to local high school seniors, students in the GED program and those placed on probation and suspended during the previous Spring Semester. The following "Special Services" were widely publicized:

1. "Success Sessions" -- Each student qualifying for the program participated in a three-hour seminar conducted by the SSDS staff. Normally, the project counselor and one or more developmental education instructors conducted each session. The handicapped specialist or ESL specialist assisted in the presentation according to the nature of the participants. Each "Success Session" consisted of three main parts; An interview and a career and academic needs assessments, A review of testing results (including a learning styles inventory), and an "Action Plan" (prescriptive learning plan) which committed each studnet toward regular weekly study center sessions with a listing of short-range and long-range objectives.
2. Establishment of Study Centers - Study Centers were established at all three campuses supervised by one of the SSDS developmental Education Instructors. Each Center had access to tutoring services, developmental resources and a computer-assisted instruction (CAI) program. While the tutors and CAI were not part of SSDS, they were nevertheless available for use as required.
3. SSDS DEI's maintained regular contact with each of the project student's instructors. This contact included frequent classroom visits to check on progress, contacting students who miss class and helping them to make up work that was missed as well as conferences with the faculty to plan and develop better procedures in helping each student succeed.
4. Field trips to work sites in the community, businesses and facilities for students in their major areas of study.
5. Visits to the university for students planning to transfer.
6. Providing a mentor for each student in the program.

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The role of the developmental education instructor (DEI) as a mentor was well defined:

1. One DEI was assigned to supervise each Study Center. The English as a Second Language Specialist and the Handicapped Specialist worked all three campuses on a regular scheudle along with the Project Counselor according to the needs of the students participating.
2. Each student, individually diagnosed, was prescribed specific activities (independent study, small group teaching, tutoring, CAI) as needed with all activities recorded in his SSDS folder and maintained by the Study Center DEI.
3. The DEI's provided assistance to all students in their regular classroom study assignments and insured that project students availed themselves of other college resources (placement office, Division Counselors, etc.)
4. Finally and probably most important the DEI--Mentor was enjoined to support, encourage, sustain, reinforce, bolster, comfort, care for, humor, and hearten all students through the formal and informal activities at their weekly contacts.

During its first semester of existence, the Special Services Program successfully met the assigned objectives with few exceptions. A total of 403 students were served by the project from September to December, 1984. Retention rate of SSDS students in the college was 95% (compared to a reported college rate of 65%). Maintenance of 2.5 GPA's at the 80% level was not achieved as well as the attainment of 12th grade ability in reading and mathematics. This was not due to any shortcomings of the program or its staff but was primarily attributed to the unusually low competency levels of students admitted to the program, a fact probably not envisioned by the proposal writers.

The Special Services for Disadvantaged Students program at the El Paso Community College has been nothing more than a series of "Success Sessions" not only for the students involved but for the SSDS staff and the college as well. Any program aimed at keeping students in school, that promotes the life-long learning concept and provides society with competent and contributing members cannot be labeled in any other way than "SUCCESS".

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